



**European Students' Union (ESU)**

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

[www.esu-online.org](http://www.esu-online.org)

Mundo-Madou  
Avenue des Arts 7/8,  
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## **European Students' Union “COVID-19 Position Paper - A multidimensional crisis that affects us all”**

The recent outbreak of COVID-19 is the gravest health crisis the world has seen in a century. A significant proportion of asymptomatic carriers of the disease, often with mild symptoms that can be confused for other illnesses, and a lack of sufficient testing makes it extremely hard to accurately assess the number of infected people. The death toll and the number of patients in urgent need of hospital treatment however is still exponentially increasing in most affected areas.<sup>1</sup>

On Monday the 6th of April (06.04.2020), the World Health Organisation counts 1.133.758 reported cases and 62.784 deaths. Alongside with the United States, Europe remains an epicentre of the global pandemic, with 621.407 confirmed cases.<sup>2</sup>

These figures exploded in a matter of days, putting Europe's national healthcare systems in severe distress, with some (e.g. Italy's and Spain's) currently on the verge of collapse. One reason for this is the slow pace and delays in taking action on part of the European decision-makers, with crisis response starting in mid-March while international spread started in January and major outbreaks outside China in mid-February. The current political answer to ease the pressure on healthcare systems has included travel bans, closure of frontiers (also within the Schengen area), schools, universities, public buildings, and workplaces. Some of the most severely hit countries enforced a complete lockdown including the shutdown of all non-essential economic activities.

The implications of this pan-European lockdown are rapidly transforming a health crisis into an economic and social crisis. As a segment within wider society, students are hit in multiple ways while facing potentially extreme social and economic distress deriving from the response to the crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cebm.net/covid-19/global-covid-19-case-fatality-rates/>

<sup>2</sup>

[https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200405-sitrep-76-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=6ecf0977\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200405-sitrep-76-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=6ecf0977_2)



## **The health crisis**

The spread of COVID-19 has highlighted the conditions of our European national healthcare systems like nothing else before. The virus, which seems to have a relatively low mortality rate (strong variations from country to country apparently deriving from the capabilities of the health care systems and testing coverage) but a significant contagious potential as well as causing a high demand for intensive care treatment of patients, has become a stress test for healthcare facilities all over the continent.<sup>3</sup>

The outbreak also challenges a series of commodification policies that have been implemented in the public health sector over the years. These commodification policies have differently affected countries and their medical systems in Europe. In some countries it is strict admission regulations, in others high tuition fees or low salaries have worsened the situation of healthcare workers, provoking a brain drain that has deprived many countries of healthcare students and medical professionals. Medical and healthcare students, as well as interns, have become increasingly important for the health system and public hospitals specifically. The results of these structural expenditure cuts are putting the right to equal access to health care under pressure while the pandemic further unfolds. Medical personnel in many countries are drastically understaffed and medical students, interns, as well as in some places other non-medical personnel are expected to staff health care facilities in order to keep the public health system running.

The European Students' Union (ESU) wants to highlight the incredible efforts and the personal sacrifices made by students and interns that currently stand in the frontline of the fight against this deadly disease while being exposed to massive physical and psychological pressure as well as the danger of infecting themselves and their loved ones. The least governments and higher education institutions can and must do at this very point is to ensure adequate monetary remuneration and academic recognition of the unspoken exertion students, interns and civilian servants are undertaking in the scope of this pandemic. Many health care students and interns were meant to be focused on further developing their skillset through a practical and

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[https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html?CDC\\_AA\\_rfVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Ftransmission.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html?CDC_AA_rfVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Ftransmission.html)



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well guided learning experience but are instead working under chaotic circumstances on the frontline of the crisis. It must be ensured that these individuals are given the opportunity to catch up on the learning at a later point, free of charge and without compromising their right to holidays. Furthermore, action has to be taken in order to protect their mental health both during and after the crisis.

In the long term, ESU sees a pressing need for generally rethinking the equitable access to particular fields of study, especially those related to caring, health, and medicine, which to date are still considered as elite fields in many countries and where the student populations often don't reflect the diversity that exists within society at large. ESU also calls upon countries to work more on the prevention of brain drain of workers in all fields, but specifically in the current context, within the health care sector.

### **The mobility crisis**

One of the first decisions taken by the governments has been the introduction of travel restrictions within and outside national borders. These restrictions have also been implemented within the Schengen Area. As a consequence, the European Union has issued a thirty-day ban on travels into the EU. This has left many international and mobile students stranded and in the impossibility to return to their home countries at the moment. The European Students' Union and many of its members are supporting mobile and international students throughout the whole world by providing knowledge on how to return to their home countries. ESU urges governments to intervene by securing the repatriation within the EU and beyond its borders of all those who are willing to return by providing safe and cost efficient means to do so.

Another serious concern for many students who decided to remain in their host countries or have not been able to repatriate yet is the issue of health insurance, especially for those who do not have a European Health Insurance Card. Therefore, we call for the automatic extension of all visas, including student visas, until the end of this pandemic.



## **The political crisis**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the importance of welfare systems, and more so the impact and repercussions that good or bad governance has on society at large. In Europe, first responses have been the scattering national policy initiatives leading to severe limitations with regards to freedom of movement and an overall increased concentration of power in the hands of the executive branches which largely turned to govern by decree in order to legislate the lockdowns.

ESU firmly believes that discrepancies and lack of coordination in the measures adopted means a longer path to normality, both in terms of lifting restrictions and with regards to the reestablishment of European liberties such as the freedom of movement. Europe is a highly interconnected continent, and no country can return to normality if the others are still under complete or partial lockdown. This has a specific impact on mobile students, of whom thousands are still stranded in host countries and left in uncertainty about their future. Therefore better coordination and solidarity across Europe is crucial.

When it comes to the concentration of powers in the hands of the political executive, it is evident that many European countries have witnessed the most extensive suspension of civil liberties in peaceful times since the end of World War II. Several governments have notified the Council of Europe of plans to derogate from the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>4</sup> While these measures are exceptional in nature and inevitable at the moment, it is a political imperative that they remain within the scope of combatting the pandemic, that they are subject to a pre-fixed time limit and that they do not subvert or escape the work of oversight and scrutiny carried out by Parliaments. The European project is built on shared democratic and fundamental values. Today more than ever, these values depend on the fulfillment of the criterias outlined above.

The European Students' Union, therefore, calls on the Vice-President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency and the Justice Commissioner to oversee and assess the national responses to the pandemic in light of the

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<https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/coronavirus-derogations-from-human-rights-send-wrong-signal-say-meps/>



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aforementioned principles and the values of democracy, transparency and full exercise of human, civil and political rights. Furthermore, ESU stresses the need for the Council of Europe and the European Union to act jointly in securing that all member states and

beyond act on the basis of solidarity with each other, and to always adopt a humanitarian approach in an effort to collectively overcome this pandemic. This also means there should be no discriminative policies targeting countries inside and outside the EU with trade restrictions or other measures hampering the free movement of goods, especially those needed to handle the current crisis, such as medical equipment. Lastly, in reflection to ESU's membership in 40 countries spread across the European continent, we specifically ask the European Union delegations in non-EU countries to take a proactive approach in promoting the values of the Union and securing that the spirit of solidarity remains upheld throughout this crisis.

### **The economic crisis**

The lockdown measures put in place by European governments are rapidly causing the unravelling of an economic crisis which has the potential to be of bigger proportions than the recession of 2008. The paralyzation of most economic activities translates into a simultaneous business and employment crisis. Countless workers currently find themselves without a salary to rely on, while businesses face a halt on revenues. Even more severely hit are part-time and autonomous workers, as well as those who have been employed without contracts or with their salaries being hidden from tax authorities, many of whom did not freely choose this situation for themselves and belong to the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups in our societies.

In this situation, many students, especially the ones from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, are put in dire difficulty when it comes to paying rent and other ongoing expenses due to their reliance on employment in order to financially support their studies. Numerous governments are promoting measures aimed at alleviating the situation for businesses and employees. The European Students Union calls for these measures to be designed to ensure the fulfillment of basic needs such as housing, food, utilities and basic services for everyone,



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regardless of their employment status or income. In particular, such measures must be available to the most marginalized, including people currently locked up in

overcrowded refugee centres. They are at a high risk of contracting and spreading the virus given the under-developed and often unsanitary infrastructure of these centres. Therefore and following the example of Portugal, the European Students' Union calls for all temporary residents, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers with impending requests to be treated as permanent residents thus allowing them to have access to public services including health care, housing, welfare benefits, bank accounts, and work and rental contracts.<sup>5</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic will result in a symmetric economic crisis. This means that no country is exempt from the recession. The political response so far by European institutions as well as member states has been widely insufficient to ensure the recovery of the economies. Furthermore due to the difference in loaning abilities between countries, there is a risk of an asymmetric financial crisis that would disrupt the European integrated monetary and economic cohesion for decades to come.<sup>6</sup> To avoid this, the European Central Bank (ECB) has announced combined measures but as the ECB President acknowledges, these are not enough if comprehensive fiscal measures are not put in place alongside them.<sup>7</sup> ESU calls for economic stimulus packages to be put in place on the national and European levels. It is crucial to acknowledge that the economic crisis will hit students, including international students around Europe, both in the short and long term. Students who sustain themselves with a student, part-time, or unstable employment are currently left with no means and need assistance. We call upon the European governments and education institutions to identify students that are left in socially disadvantaged situations and provide them with financial assistance and social support when needed.

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<sup>5</sup><https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-portugal/portugal-to-treat-migrants-as-residents-during-coronavirus-crisis-idUKKBN21F0MC?fbclid=IwAR1jqD82rQU72-aaXC6gSifEfdJP7pKU9682sIL0234bo6W-CN5Jue7RO1A>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pr/date/2020/html/ecb.mp200312~8d3aec3ff2.en.html>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pr/date/2020/html/ecb.pr200318\\_1~3949d6f266.en.html](https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pr/date/2020/html/ecb.pr200318_1~3949d6f266.en.html)



## **The European Council of the 26th March 2020: The decision to postpone any decisions**

Notwithstanding the urgency of the situation, the Eurogroup failed to come up with concrete proposals to tackle the crisis and demanded the European Council to decide on the way forward. The European Council on the 26th of March 2020, mainly dedicated to COVID-19, endorsed stronger coordination to ease the movement of necessary goods, the pooling of scientific resources to fight against the virus and the coordination for supplying medical equipment where needed.<sup>8</sup>

With regards to the economic issues however, the Council decided to not decide. Instead, it asked the Eurogroup to come up with “proposals [that] should take into account the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 shock affecting all our countries and our response will be stepped up, as necessary, with further action in an inclusive way, in light of developments, in order to deliver a comprehensive response”. Furthermore, the European Council invited the Presidents of the European Council and the president of the European Commission to “start working on a Roadmap accompanied by an Action Plan” in order to develop “a coordinated exit strategy, a comprehensive recovery plan and unprecedented investment.”<sup>9</sup>

The European Students' Union believes that the future of its constituents - the students it represents, lies in the well-being of the societies they live in, and in the economies they are going to contribute to once they finish their studies. ESU, therefore, welcomes the proposal of a pan-European coordinated Action Plan for the economic recovery of the continent, and calls on the EU to coordinate its efforts with the countries of the wider Europe. On the other hand, ESU regrets the indecisiveness of the European heads of State and government in finding a common joint proposal for financing the economic management of the crisis and the recovery of its aftermath. ESU hopes that the given deadline of two weeks will provide the Eurogroup and the European Council with the wisdom to understand that a common economic and financial response to the crisis not only fulfills the commitment of solidarity within the EU, but is also in the best interest of each Member State.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43076/26-vc-euco-statement-en.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_459](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_459)



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### **The Pan-European Recovery Action Plan and the Green Deal**

The European Students' Union believes that the coronavirus crisis has shown the importance of public investment in public goods such as welfare, education, research and healthcare. ESU therefore calls for a central focus to the investment in public goods within the Recovery Action Plan that will be proposed by the Presidents of the European Council and of the European Commission. In most of the issues related to public goods, the European Union has only supportive competences. The European Students' Union envisages the Recovery Action Plan as a coordinated framework of measures with clear Pan-European objectives. It should be co-developed and implemented by the European Union and the Member States, taking advantage of the economies of scale as well as the interdependencies and the spillover effects that national measures have on the European economy as a whole.

The Recovery Action Plan needs to become a channel of green transition for the European continent: A Green Deal based on disinvestment on carbon-intensive sectors and investment in carbon-neutrality of production, transportation and delivery of energy and goods. The economic crisis resulting from the current health crisis must not become an excuse to delay the action on climate and environmental sustainability - this would only create even more severe problems in the future both for the economy and public health. Instead, Europe must see the synergies between the massive investments that will be necessary to boost the economy and the urgently needed investments in the green transition. When thousands of Europeans lose their jobs due to COVID-19, let us make sure the new jobs we stimulate are green jobs, for example by investing in energy renovation of buildings and electrification of the transportation system.

To finance this plan, new resources need to be at disposal of the Union. The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) needs to be bigger than the currently negotiated proposals. New forms of autonomous resources for the EU should be developed while envisaging the possibility to use a new common financial instrument, directly managed by the Union and targeted on the members states' implementation of the objectives and the measures as set out in the Action Plan.



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### **The global fight against the pandemic: The students' role**

Europe and the United States are currently the epicenter of the epidemic, but the pandemic poses a huge risk of expanding the COVID-19 crisis to the global south and to areas of the world with low capacity of the healthcare systems or fragile economic conditions. The European Students' Union calls for a global response to the pandemic, with full access to reliable information, discoveries on the virus, its remedies and vaccines, as well as a common response to the developing economic crisis.

This needs to be ensured through the coordination of global organisations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation, as well as the intergovernmental economic coordination fora. The European Students' Union supports the call of the UN Secretary General for a worldwide ceasefire to commonly fight against the virus. Furthermore, ESU commits itself to engage with the student organisations of the other continents to share the experience of students and the mistakes of the handling of the epidemic in Europe and to shape a common position of the Global Students Forum on how to protect students in this crisis and respond to it, and how to ensure a socially fair, green and sustainable recovery for our society as a whole.